



Keryn Davis
Adviser (Early Childhood Education)



Sue Molloy
Adviser (Primary Assessment)



Learning Stories in Early Childhood Settings and Beyond

Part A Learning Stories in Early Childhood Settings - Keryn Davis

In 1998 the report from the *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings Project* directed by Margaret Carr (University of Waikato) was published (Carr, 1998a). Since the release of this report, the publication of the associated video resource *Assessing Children's Learning in Early Childhood Settings* (Carr, 1998b) and later *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories* (Carr, 2001), the term 'Learning Stories' has become part of the vocabulary of the early childhood sector. For many children, teachers and parents involved in the sector, Learning Stories have become part of the fabric of their 'learning place'. These communities have worked (and continue to work) at making sense of this approach to assessment within their settings as they attempt to assess *for* learning within the context of Te Whāriki.

So...what are Learning Stories?

This question is not as easy to answer as it first seems! As communities adapt and evolve this approach, Learning Stories are becoming a complex and changing concept. A teacher I have worked with in professional development recently wrote in her centre's newsletter

'Although it (Learning Stories) looks very simple the knowledge gained from Learning Stories is very rich and enables us to plan and extend experiences that the children are interested in.' Justine, Lincoln University Early Childhood Centre, 2003

Keeping in mind the purposes of this article I am going to keep this long story short and would like to make two key interdependent points which I believe must be made in order to understand what Learning Stories are:



1. This is an approach to assessment

Though many early childhood practitioners use Learning Stories as one of the tools in their assessment 'toolbox', Learning Stories are better described as an entire approach to assessment. Developed by Margaret Carr in her work with early childhood practitioners, Learning Stories are narrative and therefore qualitative in nature (Carr, 2001). Those interested in implementing this approach need to recognise that Learning Stories lie within the values and beliefs associated with narrative ideologies and need to consider how these will be supported in their setting. One such example is the notion of validity. In a narrative approach validity is sought through multiple voices or perspectives. In an early childhood setting perspectives are sought whenever possible beyond the writer of the Learning Story. Views from the child or children involved in the Learning Stories, their peers, other teachers, parents and/or other whānau are some examples of those who could become involved. Often these perspectives are provided through discussion and/or through documented and undocumented stories.

2. Learning stories have a particular view of learning

Not only were Learning Stories developed to sit within the socio-cultural context of Te Whāriki in Aotearoa New Zealand but also within the dispositional framework suggested by Carr that derives from within this context (Carr, 2001). Drawing on the work of many others (e.g. Katz, Wertsch, Rogoff, Bruner, Claxton, Silva and Bourdieu to name but a few) Carr (2001) describes learning dispositions as:

'...situated learning strategies - participation repertoires from which a learner recognizes, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities... being ready, willing and able to participate in various ways: a combination of

inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge.'(p21)

Carr identifies five domains of dispositions for learners that are desirable within these contexts:

- Taking an interest
- Being involved
- Persisting with difficulty or uncertainty
- Expressing a point of view or feeling
- Taking responsibility

Learning Stories therefore keep learning complex rather than attempt to fragment it, supporting a holistic view of learning (and assessment). They involve the writer (or narrator) in describing learning within its context while at the same time recognising and acknowledging the place of people, places and things in this mix. They engage those involved in striving to understand (Drummond, 1993 in Carr, 1998b) the learning taking place and the complexities of this through analysis, interpretation and discussion. More often than not Learning Stories lead those involved to responding to the insights of the learner or learners in some way, thus informing and supporting the learning and teaching process.

Learning Stories also take a credit, rather than deficit view of the learner (Hatherly & Sands, 2002) and support the view of learning as work in progress. In practice this means Stories are documented because they make visible achievements, interests and strengths of the learner and view the child as capable and competent rather than needy and deficient (Carr, 2001, Hatherly & Sands, 2002). For some practitioners this may require a shift in their view of the learner (Davis, 2002). This credit view reflects the aspiration statement for children described in Te Whāriki, one that would be seemingly impossible to realise without the support of the adults around them.

'For children to grow to see themselves as capable

- competent learners, healthy in mind, body and spirit and secure in the sense that they make a valued contribution to society.' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p9)

So...what do Learning Stories look like in practice in an early childhood setting?

Early childhood practitioners have developed a whole raft of practices to support the implementation of this approach in their settings. Most settings use a format like the one shown below. This was designed specifically to support the Learning Story approach by Margaret Carr, Wendy Lee and Anne Hatherly. There are many variations of this format, some with larger spaces for writing than others and some designed specifically for recording the child's voice, parent's voice or voices of other whānau members.

The format used below includes the strands of Te Whāriki, the corresponding dispositions, cues and examples of behaviours. Space is provided for recording the story (1), analysis (2) and what might be done next (3). Many early childhood settings go on to adapt the format or work outside of any set format as such. It is not important the Learning Story is written on e.g. formatted sheet or blank paper, rather *how* and *why* it was written.

The Story opposite is only one example from a series of continuing Stories about Kasmira and her interests in the written word and the responsive and reciprocal 'helping' friendships of Gabi. At this early childhood centre Learning Stories have been embraced by children, whānau and teachers alike. Both undocumented and documented Learning Stories are made visible to this community and the centre has reframed or abandoned all traditional assessment, planning and evaluation practices.



Two children are involved in this story.

One teacher (Rachael) wrote the story while another member of the teaching team (Paula) helped to analyse and decide 'what text?', thus gaining more than one perspective on this story.

Learning Story

Child: Kasmira and Gabi

Date: June 2003

Teacher: Rachael and Paula

		Examples or cues	A Learning Story
belonging mana whenua	Taking an Interest	Finding an interest <i>here</i> – a topic, an activity, a role. Recognising the familiar, enjoying the unfamiliar. Coping with change.	<div>1</div> <p>Gabi and Kasmira were sitting at the table drawing. Kas was busy writing lots of words and Gabi was keenly watching this. I (Rachael) was watching the interaction with interest, to see what would develop from this. Gabi picked up a pen and started to draw, still watching Kas write. Kas looked at Gabi and said, "I will help you write". Gabi smiled at Kas eagerly nodding her head. Gabi held the pen in her hand and Kas placed her hand on top of Gabi's to support her. "We'll write Todd", Kas said, referring to her father's name. Together they wrote the name 'Todd' with Kas guiding Gabi's hand. Gabi was very pleased with this, both she and Kas were smiling very happily at her accomplishment!</p> <p>Gabi then took the piece of paper to her bag, no doubt keen to show her parents her efforts.</p>
well-being mana atua	Being Involved	Paying attention for a sustained period, feeling safe, trusting others. Being playful with others and/or materials.	
exploration mana aotiroa	Persisting with Difficulty	Setting and choosing difficult tasks. Using a range of strategies to solve problems when 'stuck' (be specific).	
communication mana reo	Expressing an Idea or a Feeling	In a range of ways (specify). For example: oral language, gesture, music, art, writing, using numbers and patterns, telling stories.	
contribution mana tangata	Taking Responsibility	Responding to others, to stories, and imagined events, ensuring that things are fair, self-evaluating, helping others, contributing to programme.	

The interpretation/analysis highlights the main point(s) of the learning from the story.



Interpretation / Analysis	What next?
<p>Over the past few weeks Kas has started to write many words that are familiar to her such as family member's names and teacher's names. Kasmira shows an increasing understanding of the value of written text and that this has real meaning. She does this with competence and confidence. She will spend long periods of time writing, seeking information and support from teachers to develop this skill.</p> <p>Kas is always eager to assist and support other children, particularly her friend Gabi. Kas is aware of her own special strengths and confident that these can be shared with others.</p> <p>Gabi is showing a real interest in early literacy. She is writing her own name and is expressing an interest in learning and writing more words. Within in this story she was able to have her friend Kas support her in achieving her desired outcome.</p> <p>Question: What learning did I think went on here (ie. the main point(s) of the learning story)?</p>	<p>We will continue to provide Gabi with different tools and materials including drawing her attention, when appropriate, to the alphabet displayed on the wall to encourage her when drawing and writing. We will support her when writing to consolidate this skill.</p> <p>We will create opportunities for Kasmira to help children within their play and to take responsibility for some programme decisions and implementation. We'll also provide Kas with different forms of written text to support her continuing development and involve her in using writing for meaningful and authentic uses in the programme e.g. helping to write names on the whiteboard, shopping list etc</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p>Questions: How might we encourage this interest, ability, strategy, disposition, story to be more complex appear in different areas or activities in the programme How might we encourage the next 'step' in the learning story framework?</p>



Potential next responses for the learner(s) are identified here. This may be identified by the learner or learners themselves, by the teacher or teachers or by families or whānau. This could also include planning future learning experiences, teaching strategies and resources.

● Part B Learning Stories in Schools Sue Molloy

I first heard of Margaret Carr's work a couple of years ago from my Early Childhood colleagues in Teacher Support Services. Being a Primary Assessment Adviser I was impressed with the holistic approach to assessment that Carr was advocating.

Communicating children's learning by way of a story appealed to me on many levels:

1. Learning Stories honour the learner- they put the learner first then the curriculum
2. Learning Stories honour the learning process- they acknowledge that learning is complex and is more than a set of learning outcomes
3. Learning Stories are a celebration- they talk about what the child can do and celebrate achievements
4. Learning Stories are transformative- success breeds success particularly if the stories have multiple tellings (voices) and audiences (teacher, child, peer, home and beyond)

Upon first hearing about learning stories my mind immediately began to wander back to my developmental classroom (inspired by developmental teachers like Pat McDonald, at Elmwood School, and Kelvin Smythe, NZ developmental advocate and leader). Early Childhood philosophy seems to me to be very similar to a primary *developmental* way of thinking... following children's interests, maximizing child choice of learning activities and empowering children to take more control of their learning.

Another link is the current emphasis from the Ministry on formative assessment in my present job. Considering contemporary learning theory, Early Childhood practitioners wanted to, "Use their observations to improve learning, for formative assessment" (Carr, 1998) and this remains one of the cornerstones of learning stories. Primary and early

secondary folk could certainly pick up on this Early Childhood idea in a bid for more meaningful assessment with older children.

It is important to note that as far as Early Childhood assessment goes "Learning dispositions are regarded as valued learning and therefore what we assess first and foremost" (Hatherly & Sands 2002). Skills and knowledge become the context in which children practise these *habits of mind* (Katz, 1988 cited in Carr, 1998). Early Childhood learning dispositions are akin to our Essential Skills and enable us to look at *how* the child is learning.

So ... what do Learning Stories look like in practice in a school setting?

To date, I have worked with the help of Keryn, in three schools, who are utilizing a learning story approach to assessment. I am also working with a few individual teachers who are interested in exploring the idea. Below is a brief sketch of our work thus far.

School A

We talked about learning stories towards the end of 2001 and, being a democratic school, this approach to assessment seemed to sit well with the school's philosophy. School A had a meeting with Keryn in March 2002 and began experimenting. In subsequent meetings I gleaned some examples and discussed with teachers how they were finding and adapting the approach. Curriculum Links and Child's View had been incorporated onto their template. One teacher commented that, "Learning stories give more value to the learning."

School B

The idea of storying learning appealed to staff at School B because of their individualized approach to learning and their children's special needs. 2003 is ●

- the second year of incorporating learning stories into their assessment framework for their primary and secondary students. The child's voice has been developed alongside the teacher's and staff include one learning story in every six portfolio examples.

School C

School C began developing an IT profile and portfolio in 2002 and became disillusioned with reductionism. They were keen to explore a more holistic assessment framework so Keryn and I met with staff at the end of 2002 and 2003 has seen learning stories take centre stage in an experimental way. They have included their school's core values which relate well to the Early

Childhood's dispositions in their template. After some modelling by teachers children are now writing learning stories regularly.

The school's curriculum development focus has been poetic writing and visual arts and each teacher is expected to have at least a learning story from each of these two areas in the child's portfolio every term. Parents too are writing learning stories as parent involvement is a key feature of the school.

Following is an example of a learning story, from the child's perspective and the teacher's, from a primary classroom.

Student's Voice

Student: Rob Y6

Date: August 2003

Taking an Interest Familiar, unfamiliar experiences	I'm proud of the words I use like my describing words. I've improved my action beginnings. They're more interesting and sometimes funny. Sometimes the children in my group piggyback on my ideas. Mrs X challenged us to come up with more interesting action beginnings. She gave us examples which helped. I'd like to work on my endings next, making them more creative.
Being involved Interacting, paying attention, trusting	
Persisting when difficulties arise Setting or choosing challenging/difficult tasks, range of strategies for problems	
Expressing Listening, speaking, contributing ideas or feelings	
Taking responsibility Responding, evaluating self, helping, contributing	

Learning Story

Topic/Activity: Journal Writing

Date: August 2003

Child's name: Rob Y6

Observer: Bev

Taking an Interest Familiar, unfamiliar experiences	During writing time I was roving around the class and Rob stopped me to say that he thought his entry beginnings were boring. Rob wasn't alone - it seemed to be a class trend. So I initiated some class discussions about this and brainstormed and modeled some starter variations. This caught Rob's attention and he began exploring other beginnings. He got really enthusiastic and over several sessions we were able to identify real progress with this.
Being involved Interacting, paying attention, trusting	
Persisting when difficulties arise Setting or choosing challenging/difficult tasks, range of strategies for problems	
Expressing Listening, speaking, contributing ideas or feelings	
Taking responsibility Responding, evaluating self, helping, contributing	
Review (What learning happened here?)	Rob is now a keen writer. His spoken and written vocabulary have developed. As a result of his learning he willingly assists others to edit their work for improvement. He continues to seek feedback and act on it. Rob loves to share his writing and is frequently the first to do so. His writing is often used as a model for others. Rob has demonstrated the ability to capture and hold the reader's attention.
Next step(s) (Where to next with this learner?)	What I need to ensure now is that Rob maintains interest throughout his writing and can apply this to other text forms. I will remind Rob of his success from this experience and encourage his ongoing reflection of his work in future units. Rob wants to work on his endings next.

Here the original Early Childhood learning story format has been adapted with teachers opting to drop the five strands of Te Whariki and adjusting some of the language to suit their school environment.



- ❶ Though Keryn emphasizes that Learning Stories are an entire approach to assessment and learning in Early Childhood settings this is not the case currently in schools. This is because Learning Stories are a new concept for schools and are in the early exploratory stages of development. Schools presently utilize a number of assessment approaches and tools within their structures. To implement Learning Stories as a school wide approach to assessment would require a number of shifts in current practice

References:

Carr, M (1998a). *Assessing children's experiences in early childhood: Final report to the Ministry of Education (Part one)*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Carr, M. (1998b). *Assessing children's learning in early childhood settings*. Wellington: NZCER.

Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning Stories*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Carr, M., Hatherly, A., Lee, W., and Ramsey, K. (2003). Te Whāriki and assessment: A case study of teacher change. In J. Nuttall (Ed.), *Weaving Te Whāriki: Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice* (pp.187-214). Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Davis, K. (2002). "It's evolving over time": Some reflections on shifts in assessment practices through the voices of infant toddler practitioners. *The First Years: Nga Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 4(2), 32-35.

Hatherly, A. & Sands, L. (2002). So what is different about learning stories? *The First Years: Nga Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 4(1), 8-12.

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

Contacts

Email: keryn.davis@cce.ac.nz

Tel: 03 349 2579

Email: sue.molloy@cce.ac.nz

Tel: 03 349 1385